

# USAID/JAKARTA'S STRATEGIC USE OF EMPIRICAL INFORMATION

A.I.D. OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 15  
(Document Order No. PN-AAY-392)

by

Chris Hermann  
Center for Development Information and Evaluation, A.I.D.

U.S. Agency for International Development

October 1987

The views and interpretations expressed in this report are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Agency for International Development.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

Acknowledgments

1. Introduction
2. USAID/Jakarta's Strategic Use of Empirical Data
3. Evaluation of USAID/Jakarta's Information Strategy
  - 3.1 Phase One - Overcoming the Inertia: Problem Oriented Evaluations
  - 3.2 Phase Two - Putting the Pieces Together: Coordinating Information Activities for Project, Program and Policy Purposes
  - 3.3 Phase Three -- Getting the Word Out: Targetting and Dissemination of Information to a Range of Potential Users
4. Central Functions and Roles in USAID/Jakarta's Strategic Use of Information
  - 4.1 The Mission Director
  - 4.2 Project and Program Support Office and the Evaluation Section
  - 4.3 Technical Offices

5. Limits to Progress and Questions about the Future
  6. What Can Be Learned From USAID/Jakarta's Experience
    - 6.1 Basic Requirements for Any Mission
    - 6.2 Developing a Mission Information Strategy
  7. Strengthening the Agency's Commitment to Adequate Information: The Need for Regional Information Support Services and Staff Training
- Appendix A. Examples From the Three Phases in the Evolution of USAID/Jakarta's Information Strategy (provided by Tim Mahoney, USAID/Jakarta)

## FOREWORD

The Administrator of the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) commissioned this case study of USAID/Jakarta's evaluation system as part of an initiative to strengthen the Agency's use of evaluation as a project and program management tool. By sharing our experience, not only of the substantive findings and lessons from evaluation, but also of how we organize and operate to use evaluative information most effectively, we can continually build on good program management practices for promoting our development objectives.

This study highlights the possibilities available to us for using evaluation to improve project performance, to inform a Mission's decisions about the direction of its program portfolio, to support its policy dialogue, and to report on effects and impacts of assistance. The study describes the actions one Mission took to turn these possibilities into reality.

One Mission's experience is not automatically replicable in other Missions. Nevertheless, this study contains many ideas that can be adapted to other circumstances. One essential experience that is clearly transferable is the strong role of the Mission director in giving high priority to information activities and to the use of evaluative information in Mission operations and decision-making.

A.I.D.'s Bureau for Program and Policy Coordination/ Center for Development Information and Evaluation (PPC/CDIE) welcomes comments on the following study, as well as suggestions from related experiences that can help us further our understanding of how evaluative information can best serve development management.

W. Haven North  
Associate Assistant Administrator  
Center for Development Information  
and Evaluation

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tim Mahoney and Bill Coles of USAID/Jakarta's PPS/Evaluation Section provided materials used in this paper. The author appreciates the time they and other USAID/Jakarta staff gave concerning the mission's information strategy.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USAID/Jakarta has made significant progress in improving its use of empirical data to support basic mission operations and management decisions, and to assist the GOI with program planning and policy development. Strengthening host government and local research capabilities for participating in data related activities and using the resulting information is also an important objective of the information strategy. Moreover, information about potential solutions to Indonesia's development constraints is seen as an important product and integral part of the Mission's program.

### Contributing Factors

The major factors that have contributed to USAID/Jakarta's progress in establishing a strategic approach to information use include the following:

- The mission director's strong support for the information strategy stemming from a firm belief that decisions based on empirical data can contribute to achieving better development results, and that it is very important to be able to show development impact. The mission director consistently questions what empirical evidence substantiates proposed decisions and actions. The director has been willing to delay action until data become available for key decisions. He has also supported an expanded role for evaluation staff in information activities. In short, his active involvement has been essential in improving the mission's strategic use of information.
- The evaluation officer and a PSC research/information specialist provide exemplary support for the mission's information strategy. Their combination of applied research skills, generalist social science training, prior in-country experience, high motivation and interpersonal skills have been invaluable to the progress made by the mission. They have provided sound

assistance to the technical offices, developed broader program and policy issues, and expanded and refined the mission's information strategy. It is important to note that the assistance provided by the evaluation staff also trains mission staff to use information more effectively.

- The heads of the program office have provided consistent support for establishing the information strategy, and the availability of PD&S funds has allowed the office to support special studies of broader issues relevant to program and policy development.
- The research background and/or previous involvement with information related activities of the technical office directors and many of their staff facilitated acceptance of the mission's strategy.
- The mission's portfolio emphasizes applied research, technology adaptation and transfer, and policy development which necessitates a high level of involvement with information activities.
- Continuity in mission program objectives and in overall Agency objectives has enabled the mission to concentrate data related activities on a limited number of key program areas.
- The GOI is generally receptive to high quality analyses. Adverse economic conditions have recently heightened their awareness of the importance of policy reform. Information relevant to policy development, therefore, is in high demand by the GOI.
- Indonesia is able to attract high calibre consultants, many of whom are very interested in and have contributed to improving the availability and use of information.

### Major Problems Confronted

Major problems USAID/Jakarta confronted in developing an information strategy include:

- The lack of reasonably accurate empirical data combined with limited host country capability for data collection and analysis;
- The bureaucratic pressure to focus on "moving money" rather than on achieving genuine development impact;
- Negative attitudes by many mission staff toward evaluation, viewing it as an audit for accountability;

- The perception of information activities as an academic exercise largely irrelevant to better implementation;
- Lack of coordination of project funded information activities with broader information requirements for program and policy development; and
- A weak Agency commitment to the use of empirical information, compared to other priorities.

### Establishing the Strategy

The mission's information strategy has evolved through three interrelated phases. The first phase concentrated on making evaluations useful for project management purposes, improving project performance monitoring systems, and increasing the participation of GOI personnel and local researchers in data related activities.

The second phase of the strategy focused on linking project level information activities with information requirements for key program areas and GOI policy development. Special studies have also been undertaken to meet these needs. Greater attention was given to dissemination of information, which has become the principal objective of the third phase. Better packaging and presentation of information is being experimented with to reach a wider range of GOI officials. Other target groups include the general public and Congress to inform them of A.I.D.'s development impact in Indonesia. One successful approach used by the mission is a Redbook Occasional Paper series to distribute important findings more thoroughly throughout the GOI and the local development community.

Though USAID/Jakarta has made significant advances in more effective use of information, progress has not been uniform throughout the mission. This will require senior managers, especially the new mission director, to continue to support the approach as aggressively as in the past.

### Mission Improvements

Though USAID/Jakarta's approach is not necessarily replicable by other missions, it does indicate that improvements are possible. Important actions include:

- A firm commitment by senior mission management to give higher priority to information activities and the use of information in mission operations, including adequate planning of information activities in all project designs and sufficient funding for information related activities;

- The mission director consistently emphasizing the importance of basing management decisions on valid empirical data and reinforcing this message in all mission operations;
- Assigning at least one mission staff person -- either direct hire or a contractor -- to work on developing and implementing a mission information strategy, functioning as the mission's information specialist, and obtaining additional support for information activities when needed.

## Agency Improvements

The Agency needs to strengthen the priority and commitment it gives to the use of information. Action is needed in at least two key areas. First, a major constraint most missions confront is the lack of staff who can support and manage information activities. This problem could be addressed by initiating regional information support services to assist missions as is done for other specialized services (e.g., legal advice, contracting, commodity procurement). Second, improving the use of information in mission operations requires a re-orientation in the way many A.I.D. staff think about information activities. Training is needed on how to use information resources more effectively for management and decision making purposes, and how to integrate information use into work assignments.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Agency policy, USAID missions are to use empirical information from project monitoring activities, evaluations, special studies and various other sources for making decisions concerning project design and implementation, program planning, and policy development. Data related activities are to be carried out specifically to address the information requirements of managers at various levels in the mission and in host country institutions. Hence, monitoring systems, evaluations and studies are to be treated as "management tools". Participation by host government personnel and local researchers in USAID supported data related activities is encouraged because this increases the acceptance and use of the resulting information by the host country.

In reality, the rhetoric about management information systems has become the standard for the Agency to a much greater extent than its actual practice. USAID missions do use available information for project and program purposes, but that very gross generalization covers an extremely wide range indeed.

Various factors account for differences among missions in information use, some acceptable -- e.g., the poor quality of

available data, limited mission resources, overriding political constraints -- and some unacceptable -- e.g., indifference or ignorance, failure to plan and budget for data related activities, a mission director's personal predilection for "keen salty judgement" rather than empirical evidence. The Agency's lack of incentives to invest time and resources in information related activities also goes far in accounting for the disparity among missions and explaining why so many appear to be at the lower end of the spectrum.

There are, of course, missions which represent the other extreme where information use is considered integral to project and program operations. USAID/Jakarta is one case where a concerted effort has been made over the past several years to strengthen the information base available to the mission and the Government of Indonesia (GOI) for development planning and management purposes. This is not to say that the mission has established a perfect management information system. USAID/Jakarta staff emphasize that their initiative is an on-going process, that progress has been made but not uniformly throughout the mission, and that their approach is not necessarily a model easily replicable by other USAID missions. Nonetheless, USAID/Jakarta's use of information for management purposes is greater than that of many other missions, and the Mission's experience warrants careful review for factors that may be practical or relevant for other Missions.

This paper describes USAID/Jakarta's efforts to increase the use of empirical evidence in its operations and the factors which both facilitated and impeded that process. The purpose of the paper is to provide other missions, and particularly mission directors, with an example of what is required to improve the use of information in project and program management.

Generalizing from one USAID mission to others is always problematic. Someone sitting in USAID/Lome, for example, is likely to assume that simply the funding and staffing level of USAID/Jakarta enables it to support data collection and analysis activities not possible in smaller missions. Certainly that is true concerning the number of activities that can be supported. Several key factors contributing to USAID/Jakarta's progress in this area are also special or unique to this mission. But the important difference that can be observed between USAID/Jakarta and other missions is the attention given to better use of resources available for information related activities, regardless of the size of those resources. Even more important, these activities are guided by a management perspective stressing the strategic use of information throughout mission operations.

## 2. USAID/JAKARTA'S STRATEGIC USE OF EMPIRICAL DATA

USAID/Jakarta's efforts to increase the use of information in mission operations are guided by an emphasis on the value

and necessity of empirical data for sound decision making. This approach is referred to in the mission as the "strategic use of empirical data," and the term strategic is appropriate in several ways. First, data collection and analysis activities are conducted to provide pertinent information for upcoming decisions concerning project design and implementation, program planning and policy development. Data related activities are used strategically in the sense that they are undertaken in anticipation of information requirements for key decisions to be made by USAID staff and GOI officials. Second, the information these activities generate is used to formulate development strategies implemented through project interventions, program assistance and policy reform. Third, data related activities are treated as an integral component of the project, program or policy activity, and information from these activities is a part of the intervention or strategy.

The strategic use of information encompasses and goes beyond standard monitoring and evaluation. Information is treated as an important output of the development activities the mission and the GOI jointly undertake. Central to this perspective is periodic questioning of the effectiveness and associated costs of current development activities, the continuing validity of initial assumptions, what the results obtained thus far suggest about program and policy development, etc. Where solutions to development problems are not known or well understood, a strategic use of information helps determine what the alternatives are and whether they are effective and affordable. In this regard, the strategic use of empirical data is an important objective of the mission's development assistance -- providing the "risk capital" to assist the GOI to identify the best approaches to overcoming Indonesia's development constraints.

The strategic use of empirical data generally involves four principal steps. First, the questions which need to be answered must be identified to determine what information is needed. Second, an appropriate method for obtaining the necessary data must be selected which fits within time and budget constraints. Obviously, data collection and analysis must focus on the questions to be answered. Third, the resulting information must be packaged and presented in a form which decision makers needing the information can understand and use. This typically involves interpreting the results of studies for individuals who have little or no research training. To increase the utility of the information, a fourth step is dissemination of the information to different groups of potential users. This might involve re-packaging the information for dissemination through special presentations in addition to written reports and summaries. As obvious as this process might seem, considerable thought and effort is required to make this approach work as well as it has in USAID/Jakarta.

### 3. EVALUATION OF USAID/JAKARTA'S INFORMATION STRATEGY



In retrospect, USAID/Jakarta's strategic use of empirical data has involved three interrelated phases of development. This was not planned, but rather, it evolved as progress was made in improving the mission's information generation and use in one area and then moving on to what appeared to be the logical next step.

### 3.1 Phase One - Overcoming the Inertia: Problem Oriented Evaluations

USAID/Jakarta confronted three basic problems in initiating its information strategy which are common to many other missions; they were:

- A lack of valid empirical data useful for decision making purposes concerning project design and implementation, program planning and policy development.
- A predisposition on the part of mission staff to view evaluations as audits for accountability rather than activities designed to inform managers about the intermediate results of project interventions, the effectiveness of the implementation strategy to achieve project objectives, and the continuing validity of those objectives.
- Limited host country research capability to collect valid empirical data for project monitoring and evaluation, and low collaboration with host country counterparts in the use of such data for management purposes.

The first phase of USAID/Jakarta's information strategy emphasized making monitoring and evaluation functions useful management activities, and strengthening GOI capability for participating more fully in information activities. Over a two year period, the mission made genuine progress toward these objectives, the results of which were evaluation findings and recommendations which led to substantial modifications in project design and in one case, termination of a poorly performing project. (Appendix A provides examples of first phase results).

The accomplishments of the first phase were modest in the sense that they were not something radically new or different from what many other missions would claim as their objectives in monitoring and evaluation. Nor was progress made uniformly throughout the mission. What was significant, however, was that the strategy was able to offset the original inertia and negative attitudes about evaluations to a degree many other missions do not achieve.

During this first phase, the potential utility of evaluations for management decision-making was clearly demonstrated. A number of people accepted the strategic use of information approach who previously had not viewed evaluation and data related activities in this way. Similarly, the effort to strengthen host country capability for applied research also produced improvements. Assistance from the mission's evaluation officer, encouragement and support from the mission director, and positive examples of how monitoring and evaluation could serve useful management purposes were instrumental at this stage.

It became apparent that the differing perspectives and capabilities of the technical offices influenced the extent to which the mission's information strategy was accepted. For example, the substantive issues addressed by the offices differ. The sectoral focus of some offices are more narrowly defined than others, making it easier to identify key information requirements. The Office of Population and Health, for instance, was already well attuned to a strategic use of information. Therefore, the efforts of the evaluation officer were targetted on those offices and projects where there was a need for assistance and a genuine interest in using more effectively their information resources.

The mission's information strategy also required project officers to think more carefully about what they needed to know. The tendency was to assume that the strategy their projects were following was sound, and, consequently, to expect evaluations to tell them what more is needed to be done following the same strategy. This reflected a lack of confidence on the part of project officers to question the work and judgement of professional consultants working on the project. The director's support for better evidence supporting project decisions, and assistance from the evaluation officer and project consultants were necessary to offset this tendency.

As is true for many projects, the lack of implementation monitoring data which provide information about the short-term or intermediate effects of project outputs was often weak. Consequently, evaluations had to determine first what had happened thus far in the project, rather than why -- i.e., they were descriptive rather than analytic. During the first phase, attention was drawn to this problem with the only viable solution being the development of better monitoring systems in the future.

A very interesting and important aspect of the mission's information strategy was to use the monitoring and evaluation function as a vehicle for strengthening GOI institutional capacity for data collection and analysis for development management purposes. As is typical of many countries, there are too few skilled researchers on the host country side to meet the need for valid data concerning project performance and other development issues. In Indonesia, this problem is compounded by the reluctance of local researchers to discuss openly the

inadequacies or poor performance of projects. (Public criticism of this sort runs contrary to the Indonesian mode of operation).

Nonetheless, through persistence and by providing the opportunity to work on evaluative studies, the mission's strategy of strengthening applied research in both the GOI and in private research firms has resulted in genuine improvements.

Finally, progress during this first phase was limited by staff and funding constraints. The evaluation officer was able to devote more than half his time to improving information use in the mission, in part due to the support from the mission director and the head of the program office, but also due to a strong personal commitment to the value of sound applied research in the development process. However, during the first phase, one person -- the evaluation officer -- was giving time to establishing the information strategy in a mission with a comparatively large portfolio. The lack of funds for information activities also constrained the extent to which the mission's strategy could be fully implemented. As a result, priorities had to be set as to which information activities could be supported through the mission's evaluation section.

### 3.2 Phase Two - Putting the Pieces Together: Coordinating Information Activities for Project, Program and Policy Purposes

As progress was made toward demonstrating the management utility of monitoring and evaluation, USAID/Jakarta initiated a very ambitious effort to provide an overall framework to guide and coordinate data related activities for project monitoring and evaluation and special studies. The objective was to address key information requirements for broader program and policy development purposes. While the first phase objectives stressing the management utility of data related activities at the project level were continued, a new emphasis was placed on linking project information activities to program and policy areas central to the mission's portfolio. This entails:

- Designing project performance monitoring systems to provide data relevant to core programmatic issues as well as to project objectives;
- Conducting special studies to assess the effectiveness of current implementation strategies for specific development constraints and/or to obtain provide information pertinent to policy development; and
- Introducing the information from these activities into the GOI's policy development process.

Coordinating data related activities for program and policy purposes is an idea which periodically is discussed within the Agency, but few -- if any -- missions have ever really put in place a mechanism for doing it. Therefore, the progress USAID/Jakarta

has made in this area, albeit limited, is a significant accomplishment. (Appendix A provides an example of a Phase Two activity.)

As with the first phase, several issues have emerged from advancing the mission's information strategy in these areas. A major problem has been overcoming the narrow focus of project supported data related activities. Project staff tend to focus on the specific elements of the project at the expense of broader programmatic questions which are of lower priority to them. The second phase of the mission's strategy draws attention specifically to the program and policy areas which pertain to the project. The mission has not fully resolved the problem. But to overcome this difference of perspective, the importance of incorporating broader program and policy concerns into project monitoring and evaluation activities is a theme which has to be repeated and reinforced.

A corollary to the issue of project versus program and policy information needs is the potentially competing and even conflicting interests of technical offices versus the program office. The technical offices view project resources as within their control; whereas how the mission's limited resources are used is certainly a legitimate responsibility of the program office. Information activities fall somewhere in between. Disagreements have arisen over the proper role of the program office's evaluation function -- is it to merely advise or directly participate in decisions about data related activities? There is no easy solution to this issue, and how it is dealt with varies among technical offices and project staff. The director's constant demand for sound evidence in management decisions, however, encourages cooperation in many cases. Similarly, the program office has priority program areas and projects where broader information requirements are monitored more closely or persistently than in other projects. Where conflict is unavoidable, the director has mediated the situation.

The funding and staffing limitations were addressed in the second phase. Increased interest within the mission in information related activities has led to better planning and funding for such work. PD&S funds have also been budgeted for special studies of important program and policy issues. The evaluation officer's work load shifted increasingly to the program office's planning and budget activities with less time devoted to information activities. However, a well trained and experienced researcher was hired via a personal services contract (PSC) to work with the evaluation officer to support the mission's information strategy. But the expanding number of special studies, monitoring and evaluation and dissemination activities have placed even greater demands on the evaluation section despite increased funding and a PSC.

### 3.3 Phase Three -- Getting the Word Out: Targetting and Dissemination of Information to a Range of Potential Users

During the third phase of the mission's strategy, greater effort was made to disseminate information generated by project monitoring and evaluation and from special studies. During the past twelve to eighteen months with falling oil revenues, the GOI has become more cognizant of and committed to policy reform.

Due to the mission's good access to GOI decision makers and to earlier efforts to improve available data on important development issues, the mission is able to provide relatively high quality information to the GOI.

The mission confronts a standard problem in maximizing the utility of its available information. Much of the information generated through USAID activities is used only for the most immediate purposes for which it is obtained. However, this information often has additional utility which "first round" users do not typically consider. A mechanism for getting potentially useful information into the hands of "second round" users is clearly needed. To do this, GOI information requirements must first be identified, those needs must be linked to available information (or upcoming data related activities), and then that information must be packaged and presented in forms useful to specific groups of users -- all of which is much easier said than done.

The mission has made some progress toward more effective dissemination of information to the GOI. In addition to project meetings and routine project documents, the mission periodically sponsors special presentations and seminars for the GOI where study findings and their implications for program and policy development are discussed. The mission has also initiated a special Redbook Occasional Papers series where the results of evaluations and special studies are published in a format which can be distributed more widely than standard reports. Material from reports is carefully edited and the executive summary of a Redbook publication is translated into Indonesian to increase its use by the GOI. (See Appendix A for an example of the type of information presented in the Redbook Series.)

In comparison to many other missions, USAID/Jakarta has made considerably greater progress in disseminating information to the GOI. However, even greater use of information generated by USAID activities within GOI decision making processes is certainly possible. The mission is well aware of this potential. Information activities tend to focus on the needs of GOI technical staff, while individuals key to program and policy decisions within the GOI are not being reached routinely. The linkage between the information requirements of these key individuals and USAID funded data related activities which might serve those needs is often weak. Nor are USAID technical staff well attuned to the intent or uses of the Redbook series. This problem is compounded by the lack of a staff person to manage the dissemination process -- e.g., someone who is knowledgeable about GOI information needs, screens mission information for potential applications, and helps package and present

information useful to the GOI. At this point, the dissemination problem is the weakest link in the mission's information strategy.

#### 4. CENTRAL FUNCTIONS AND ROLES IN USAID/JAKARTA'S STRATEGIC USE OF INFORMATION

USAID/Jakarta's information strategy requires participation across the board -- by the mission director, program staff, project officers and the project implementation team. The functions performed by key individuals in establishing the mission's information strategy offer insight into personnel and staff time requirements.

##### 4.1 The Mission Director

USAID/Jakarta's mission director has been central to improving the mission's investment in data related activities and the use of the resulting information for management purposes. Without the director's strong support for the mission's information strategy, it would have been impossible to have forwarded the strategic use of information approach within the mission.

Obtaining better development results is obviously an objective all mission directors accept. USAID/Jakarta's director firmly believed that development impact could be increased by ensuring that major decisions are based on valid empirical data and that it was important that these results could be shown. As simple as that might sound, integrating this perspective into mission operations often runs contrary to the priority given to moving funds on schedule. In effect, giving greater attention to the information basis of decisions and actions conflicts with the tendency to focus almost exclusively on the implementation process. Furthermore, some staff have viewed this emphasis on information as an academic exercise. The main point that had to be driven home time and again was that basing decisions on adequate empirical information, even when it required delaying the decision until data were collected and analyzed, is germane to sound investment and management of development resources, and not an impediment to implementation.

From the outset of his assignment, the director consistently questioned the basis of major decisions or actions proposed by mission staff -- e.g., "what are the main issues or problems involved?", "what does previous experience with these problems suggest?" and most important "how do you know that and what is the evidence?" If adequate information were lacking, the next question would be "what are you doing to get the necessary data?" This questioning emphasized the importance of being able to justify proposed courses of action, decisions,

strategies, etc., to a greater degree than would be the case if only procedural or operational matters were considered. This demand for evidence was made regardless of the specific development activity -- project design, implementation changes, program and policy development. Equally important, the director was willing to delay making key decisions until adequate information became available. Of course, A.I.D.'s own system imposes limits to this -- at some point, decisions and actions have to be made regardless of the information at hand. Nonetheless, the fact that the director expects such information to be available to support major decisions is now widely recognized throughout the mission.

The pressure for data and information to substantiate decisions and actions by mission staff has required the director to remain informed about the substantive issues of the program. This has enabled the director to emphasize assessment of project strategies and activities in key program areas regarding their effectiveness in addressing important development constraints. To be able to respond to demands for information, the director has consistently supported project funding for data related activities. The director's good lines of communication with GOI policy makers also contributed to getting pertinent information to key decision makers. Having good quality information about important policy issues also enabled the director to enter into discussions that otherwise might not have been possible.

The director also makes a concerted effort to reinforce the importance of basing decisions on valid empirical data. He will note especially good evaluation work or special studies which have contributed to improving project or program performance, or which have been particularly helpful to the GOI during staff meetings. The Redbook Occasional Papers Series also highlights the utility and value of mission support for data related activities. This gives further credence to the time staff devote to information activities and reiterates the point that this is not a sterile academic exercise, but instead, one which is integral to the mission's development assistance program.

#### 4.2 Project and Program Support Office and the Evaluation Section

In USAID/Jakarta, the Project and Program Support Office (PPS) has responsibility for backstopping the mission's evaluation system. The mission's evaluation section currently consists of a program office and a PSC, both of whom have advanced social science research training (Ph.D.s in anthropology), and field work experience in Indonesia. Consequently, the research skills they bring to the evaluation/information function of the mission, their knowledge of the country and command of the language is considerably stronger than that found in other mission evaluation sections. Like the mission director, their generalist training enables them to work on substantive issues across the mission's

portfolio. They also share the mission director's perspective regarding the importance of information in development assistance programs. Equally important, both approach their assignments as information specialists for the mission, rather than as more narrowly defined evaluation staff.

The PPS/Evaluation Section has been instrumental in the development of the mission's information strategy. PPS has major responsibilities in project design and program planning which certainly includes associated information activities. Furthermore, PPS backstops projects managed by the technical offices which creates additional opportunities to assist with data related activities. The fact that the evaluation officer has to sign off on project activities provides additional useful leverage on occasion. Because of PPS's planning and information responsibilities, pertinent data are often being collected prior to actual design work and are seen as an integral part of the process by the technical offices (as opposed to some afterthought which is too frequently the case in A.I.D.'s design process). In short, PPS serves as the place in the mission where the broader, longer-term information requirements of the mission and the director's demand for "the evidence" can be supported.

As suggested above, the assistance provided by the evaluation section goes beyond the narrow definition of this function typical of other USAID missions. PPS staff are very much involved in standard evaluation activities, such as monitoring the mission's evaluation schedule, helping with the writing scopes of work, selection of team members, etc. But they are also very much involved with planning project information systems, designing special studies and the implementation of those activities. They also follow closely projects which have potential importance for program and policy development and, in particular, the information these projects should generate. The evaluation officer has also been instrumental in increasing the participation of GOI researchers in information activities to strengthen local capacity for such work. For the past two years, PD&S funds have further expanded the evaluation section's ability to support information activities in important program and policy development areas.

In addition to the technical assistance provided to the mission, the evaluation section is strongly oriented toward staff training. A major training focus is how to use project monitoring, evaluation and special studies for management purposes. Technical staff report that the PPS staff have encouraged or stimulated them to think about issues they ordinarily would not have considered. For example, many project officers have never conducted an evaluation themselves; some view evaluations negatively; while many lack the experience or orientation to address more than narrow implementation issues through project evaluations. Thinking through the questions an upcoming evaluation should answer in light of how project objectives have been modified or refined during the course of implementation has been a very useful opportunity to project



staff. This type of interaction -- e.g., suggesting to a project officer that there are additional ways to view the activity this person is managing full time -- requires deft social skills to avoid counterproductive argument and conflict. Sometimes disagreements have resulted, but usually not. An important contributing factor in this exchange of ideas is the respect project officers have for the views of the evaluation section staff. Their knowledge about the country, their technical skills and perspective on development, and their record of providing useful advice obviously are important. But their willingness to help combined with sharp interpersonal skills contribute significantly to working as colleagues with other mission staff.

The training assistance is, of course, very time consuming for PPS staff, but the time required is well spent. Once project officers see firsthand that monitoring, evaluation and studies can actually assist them and can contribute to better development results, they are very likely to use project information resources far more effectively in the future. In short, the training aspect of the assistance provided by PPS staff is as important as their technical advice, and probably more so in the long run for the mission and the Agency.

One final point worth noting is the perspective concerning information activities which guides much of the assistance provided by the PPS/Evaluation Section. As noted earlier, the evaluation officer and the PSC function as in-house information specialists for the mission and both very much share the director's view concerning the importance of information related activities for improving development assistance. But their perspective goes yet another step to view information as an important output of A.I.D.'s development programs not only in Indonesia but for the Agency overall. This reiterates the earlier point that A.I.D. provides the risk capital host countries cannot afford to test alternative solutions to significant development constraints. It is risk capital in the sense that the effort has a high probability of failing -- i.e., not finding a viable solution. When successful, the initial output of these activities is typically not the elimination of the constraint on a broad scale, but rather, information about approaches most likely to be effective and affordable. This perspective on information and what A.I.D. can contribute very much permeates the work of the PPS/Evaluation Section. It has also been fundamental to the progress the mission has made, though few may recognize it as such.

#### 4.3 Technical Offices

The mission director can demand, the PPS/Evaluation Section can assist and both can encourage, but the technical offices ultimately determine the extent to which a strategic use of information will guide their investment in data related activities and their use of the resulting information for

decision making purposes. In general, the technical offices have responded positively to the mission's information strategy, incorporating it, in part or fully, into their sector programs.

The current heads of the technical offices either have strong research backgrounds or prior information related work experience which facilitates their acceptance of the strategic use of information approach. A number of project officers also have advanced training in a social science discipline, hence they too have a inclination to want and use information perhaps more than other project officers. In other words, there is a predisposition among a number of mission staff, including the heads of the technical offices, to view increased use of information as a logical route for improving project and program management. Other missions also have such staff, but few have such a high proportion.

The acceptance and use of the mission's information strategy has also benefitted from the calibre of long and short-term consultants that USAID/Jakarta's technical offices are able to attract. Indonesia is, after all, a very desirable country in which to work; this allows the mission to be highly selective. Many of these consultants are very interested in information related activities. They have participated in identifying key information requirements, collecting and analyzing the pertinent data and discussing the findings with USAID and GOI officials.

Interest in better management information is all well and good, but action requires resources for data related activities. In this regard, the technical offices have been able to support data collection and analysis because of the availability of funding for such work. In large part, this has resulted from the director's support for information activities and from acting upon the mission's information strategy. For example, the head of the Agriculture and Rural Development office reported that the design of new projects typically includes substantial funding -- in some cases \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 -- for monitoring and evaluation, special studies, and technical assistance for information activities. There is probably no better measure of the degree to which the strategic use of empirical data has been incorporated into mission operations than budget allocations for such work.

## 5. LIMITS TO PROGRESS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

The preceding sections outline USAID/Jakarta's progress toward establishing an effective information strategy. Numerous examples of how data contributed significantly to planning and decision making could be cited. However, it should be no surprise that there still is more to be done in establishing the mission's information strategy. The mission is certainly well aware of the need for further development of the strategy. More troublesome is the uncertainty about sustaining the improvements

achieved to date. The purpose here is not to detract from the mission's accomplishments, but rather to present a balanced picture.

As one division chief pointed out, the strategic use of empirical data is an idea far more engrained in PPS and the director's office than at the project level. The mission's information strategy is not part of the operational reality of all project officers. Evaluation scopes of work, for example, are still proposed which contain vague, non-directive statements (e.g., "The purpose of the evaluation is to review the accomplishments of the project to date"). Project staff sometimes expect PPS to write the scope of work for them. Alternatively, the project officer drafts a poor scope of work, tries to revise it but is unsuccessful, whereupon PPS ends up having to invest its time in producing a sound scope for the evaluation. Other examples include project officers not having a clear idea about what the evaluation should examine and blindly following what project contractors suggest. As one person knowledgeable about the mission's information strategy observed, some evaluations seem to be directed by a hidden agenda which has little to do with the need for information.

Integrating program and policy level issues into project information systems and evaluations is not fully accepted throughout the mission. The proper role of PPS in trying to incorporate such issues into project information activities is also unclear. On the one hand, the use of mission resources and the need for program and policy related information is certainly PPS' responsibility. On the other hand, the funds being used are part of the technical offices' budgets and from their point of view, the information activities should service their needs first. Furthermore, at least one technical office has its own ideas about how to deal with information requirements for program and policy development in its sector. Disagreements are predictable and have occurred, but disagreement also reflects the limits of acceptance by technical offices of the mission's information strategy.

One office director also pointed out that the Mission's information strategy has credence only to a certain point because it is periodically undercut by politically motivated decisions. Emphasizing the importance of basing decisions on empirical data is laudable. But when time and resources are invested in obtaining information and then decisions are made for purely political reasons irrespective of the data, the mission's information strategy cannot help but seem somewhat hollow. To be fair, this is not a weakness of the mission's information strategy. The reality of the Agency is that political objectives often influence USAID operations and that fact places definite boundaries on how far any mission can base decision making on empirical information.

In addition to limited receptivity by some technical mission staff, the GOI has not consistently supported proposed data related activities, such as adequate monitoring and

evaluation in certain projects. Though the mission's efforts to expand local capabilities for data related activities have led to improvements, Indonesian evaluators are still reluctant to discuss openly in reports apparent weaknesses in projects. Similarly, though the GOI is generally responsive to valid data and sound analyses, they have also withheld study findings because the results had political/bureaucratic implications or were thought to be overly critical. In short, the mission's strategy has expanded host country participation in and support for information related activities, but much more remains to be done.

Another part of the mission's strategy which is not well developed is dissemination of information to a wider range of potential users. GOI decision makers and others directly involved with development activities are an obvious group to be reached, but more information for Congress and the general public on the impact of USAID/Jakarta's program is needed as well.

More disturbing than limited progress in certain areas is the uncertainty about USAID/Jakarta's ability to sustain the information strategy in coming years. As staffing levels continue to decrease (from seventy USDH several years ago to presently forty), it will become increasingly harder to support information activities as has been done over the past four years. There are indications of this already. The evaluation officer is increasingly working on non-information related, program office tasks. Similarly, the PSC had been working almost exclusively on information related activities, but has gradually become more involved with program office tasks. This reflects the office's current workload and staffing pattern, not a lack of support for information activities (the current head of PPS is highly supportive of the strategy, as was her predecessor). This re-allocation of work time is occurring while other mission staff report they would like even more time from PPS staff for information related activities. Unmet requests for assistance may lessen interest in the strategy.

Personnel changes are also a potential problem. The mission director who so strongly supported the information strategy has recently been re-assigned. Whether the new director will be as strongly committed to the initiative remains to be seen. The evaluation officer is also due for re-assignment in the next year. He has been instrumental in improving the mission's information activities. As noted earlier, a large part of his effectiveness has been his personal credibility in the mission. The question which naturally arises is how the next evaluation officer will compare and whether this person will develop credibility as the present evaluation officer has. In short, the information strategy does not appear to be so deeply engrained in mission operations that it will continue without the presence of certain individuals or comparable support by their replacements.

## 6. WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM USAID/JAKARTA's EXPERIENCE

### 6.1 Basic Requirements for Any Mission

The development of USAID/Jakarta's information strategy and the progress the mission has made in improving its information activities resulted from a number of factors which have contributed to this process. Most important have been:

- The mission director's strong support for the strategy;
- The ability of the evaluation officer and the PSC information specialist to (1) provide sound assistance to the technical offices, (2) formulate information strategies for specific projects which are also pertinent to broader program and policy issues, and (3) backstop and guide the overall initiative;
- Consistent support for information activities from the PPS office directors and in recent years, the availability of PD&S funds to the office for special studies;
- The research background and/or general receptivity by the technical office directors and many of their staff to a strategic use of information approach;
- The emphasis on applied research in the mission's portfolio and availability of funding (largely grant funding) for data related activities;
- Continuity in the mission's development objectives as well as in the Agency's broader objectives;
- The general receptivity of the GOI to valid data and high quality analyses; and
- The calibre of consultants available to the mission and the GOI, and their interest in and contribution to improving data related activities.

A number of these these factors are "givens" in USAID/Jakarta's situation, such as a strong in-house capability for data related activities, the research training or information orientation of technical office directors and staff; the applied research emphasis in the portfolio and funding to support it, and the calibre of consultants the mission can draw on for technical assistance. These factors are not easily manipulated or controlled and hence, not readily transferable or replicable in other missions.

However, USAID/Jakarta's experience clearly exemplifies two fundamental requirements for missions to improve their use of information for management purposes. First, a clear commitment

by senior mission managers to more effective investment and use of resources available for information related activities is certainly possible in any USAID program, regardless of the level of those resources. At the very least, this gives higher priority to information activities in mission operations -- they become integral to the development program rather than merely attachments to it. Greater attention to information requirements and more careful planning of data related activities to meet those needs in the design of projects and during the course of implementation would be a major improvement in most missions. Greater involvement of host country personnel in monitoring and evaluation, special studies and other data related activities should also be part of this initiative for all missions.

Second, the active involvement of the mission director is absolutely essential. Establishing an information strategy cannot be driven from outside of the mission. AID/Washington can issue endless directives and the pithiest of guidance, and missions can go through the appropriate motions in responding. But genuine improvements will not occur until the mission director makes it clear that empirical data are a high priority "commodity" in the operations of the mission's development program. USAID/Jakarta's director serves as an excellent role model for other mission directors in this regard. Section 3.1 describes the director's role, most important are:

- Consistent support for the information strategy;
- Consistent support for direct involvement by the PPS/Evaluation Section in the information activities of technical offices;
- Insistence on having empirical evidence to guide decisions and actions and providing adequate funding for these activities in project and program budgets;
- Repeated emphasis on the importance of achieving development impact and being able to show these results; and
- A willingness to accept modest, gradual improvements during the first two years with the realization that more significant progress will be achieved in coming years as the strategy becomes more fully established in Mission operations.

## 6.2 Developing a Mission Information Strategy

How other missions formulate and implement information strategies will vary according to the nature of their portfolios and corresponding information requirements, staffing and funding levels, host country capability for data related activities, the availability of technical assistance for improving information systems, and other country or mission specific factors. In

other words, there is no one approach or strategy appropriate for all missions. However, USAID/Jakarta's experience provides some insight into where to start and what to expect.

The progress made by USAID/Jakarta clearly indicates that a comprehensive plan for developing an information strategy is unnecessary at the outset. The mission's information strategy evolved as progress in one area was made. Several mission staff clearly understood how information activities could be used more strategically, but no one person was the constant source of innovation. An atmosphere where people could exchange ideas on how to improve information use within a project or more broadly throughout the mission fostered development of the strategy and participation in it. Similarly, the guidance and suggestions made by the evaluation section to technical staff were done in a non-threatening, collegial fashion.

USAID/Jakarta's experience also suggests that improving the utility of project evaluations for management decisions is a logical starting point for a mission information strategy. This requires planning evaluations to be problem oriented and focused on questions most important to project managers. Progress here should demonstrate the utility evaluations and other data related activities can have. Broadening out from an emphasis on project evaluation to information systems and later to program and policy level information requirements, as USAID/Jakarta did, might be feasible for other missions.

USAID/Jakarta's experience also suggests that results during the initial years are likely to be modest -- e.g., useful management information from several important evaluations and better planning of information systems in a new project or two. Note that this was in a mission with considerable in-house staff capability for data related activities, implying that results may be even more limited in missions with less capability.

Progress is achieved gradually in large part because a strategic approach to using information requires a re-orientation in how many project officers and their supervisors go about conducting A.I.D.'s business. That is not going to come about quickly in an overnight conversion. An important part of the process is getting staff to think about information requirements more carefully than most have probably done before. The value of this effort is not evident until the evaluation or study produces credible and useful information for the manager (seeing is believing). Nor is it likely that all staff will accept the strategic use of information approach at the outset (no mass conversions). But with persistence and some luck, many will gradually "buy in". All of this takes time and patience on the part of mission managers. A realistic expectation is that major improvements, such as being able to show development impact in key program areas, will only come after several years of consistent effort. It also takes someone with the necessary skills, motivation and work time to support and develop the strategy -- a serious problem most missions confront.

## 7. STRENGTHENING THE AGENCY'S COMMITMENT TO ADEQUATE INFORMATION: THE NEED FOR REGIONAL INFORMATION SUPPORT SERVICES AND STAFF TRAINING

A fundamental problem any mission confronts in developing an information strategy is a weak commitment to information related activities. On the one hand, various legislative and Agency requirements stipulate the use of appropriate information in support of mission operations. On the other hand, the resources needed to obtain the information to meet these requirements are often too limited or totally lacking.

Information related activities are often assigned such a low priority in Agency operations that they become dispensable, or entirely overlooked. Unfortunately, there is nothing new about these observations; the disincentives to adequate use of information in A.I.D. are widely recognized, but never systematically addressed.

USAID/Jakarta offers a perfect illustration of the Agency's limited commitment to adequate use of information. During the first two years of USAID/Jakarta's initiative to establish its information strategy, the evaluation officer devoted more than half of his time to this initiative. This was with the full support of the mission director and the head of the program office (PPS). His efforts were indeed invaluable to the progress the mission made and his contribution was acknowledged by merit awards.

Recently, the evaluation officer has increasingly directed his time to other program responsibilities, and expects to concentrate even more on such work, because that is clearly the route to advance his career -- a perfectly understandable decision. All the more understandable in light of the fact that despite his contribution to establishing a mission information strategy, he did not receive a promotion in grade until he began working on more standard program office tasks. The message is clear: career advancement within the Agency is simply not possible if an individual devotes time to information activities as USAID/Jakarta's evaluation officer had. Unfortunately, this is not a twisted interpretation of the facts -- one person who sat on the review committee reported that this was the thinking which implicitly guided the decision.

The staffing issue is germane to improving a mission's investment and use of information resources. An information strategy will not happen miraculously or merely by pronouncement -- someone is going to have to devote time to developing it. Ideally, a mission has a staff person with the necessary skills and motivation. In reality, many missions do not and with continuing staff reductions, the pressure will be to use staff increasingly to meet the routine workload (in which information related activities are usually of much lower priority).



A possible alternative to in-house capability for information activities is to make available to missions the services of information specialists on a regional basis, just as with legal advisors and commodity procurement specialists. Their performance would be assessed on the basis of the services they provide as specialists just as lawyers and commodity procurement specialists are judged. Information specialists operating from a central Agency post -- e.g., REDSO/EA, REDSO/WA, Bangkok, Cairo and ROCAP -- could provide support services to missions which do not have in-house capability for supporting information activities. The regional information specialists should be direct hire staff so that they can participate in contracting for information activities and, if for no other reason, to give them greater credibility in the missions. They should have a generalist background in social sciences, graduate degree training, applied research experience in developing countries, and prior experience with the information requirements of A.I.D.'s development projects and programs. Their services would include technical assistance in planning and backstopping information activities, and training mission staff by working closely with them on the information related aspects of their job assignments.

The combination of a regional information specialist and a mission PSC would increase the utility of a regional support service. The PSC would backstop the mission's information activities and/or overall information strategy to give continuity to the initiative. Work time, in-country experience and interest in information activities would be more important than advanced technical skills. Using PSCs in this capacity appears to work well for several missions, including USAID/Jakarta, and this approach should be used more widely.

A second important action the Agency could take to improve information use is more training for project and program staff. As USAID/Jakarta demonstrates, getting people to think differently about the utility of information activities as an integral part of their job responsibilities is central to establishing a strategic use of empirical data. Training to re-orient staff on how to use information resources should focus not on technical issues (the last thing project officers need are crash courses on statistics or sample survey design). Rather, what project officers need is to learn how to use information activities and what they produce for better planning, management and decision making and how to integrate that into A.I.D. operations.

USAID/Jakarta's experience illustrates both the need for better use of information in A.I.D.'s development programs and the possibilities for doing so. However, it is equally apparent that the progress the mission made was despite handicaps in the Agency's system. The basic question in following USAID/Jakarta's lead is whether senior AID managers are genuinely committed to adequate information use for better development results, and are determined to back their commitment

with resources.

## APPENDIX A

### EXAMPLES FROM THE THREE PHASES IN THE EVOLUTION OF USAID/JAKARTA'S INFORMATION STRATEGY (Provided by Tim Mahoney, USAID/Jakarta)

#### 1. PHASE ONE EXAMPLE

##### CRS Title II Assessment

One of the first evaluations conducted to demonstrate the use of evaluation data in management decisions was the 1983 Assessment of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Title II program. At that point, a decision had to be made on the future of Title II and it would depend in part on accountability in commodity distribution and not on program impact. This made it difficult to assess the potential for linkages between Title II and other components of the mission portfolio, e.g., primary health care. The evaluation, therefore, carefully examined current Title II program assistance and related management capabilities.

The report concluded that the program lacked clearly defined objectives and that staff resources were being concentrated almost exclusively on food distribution. It was also found that CRS counterpart PVOs had the capacity and interest to shift from a welfare to a development orientation. Building on these findings, a twelve month operational plan was proposed for re-defining program objectives and constructing management systems to achieve them. The mission concurred and Child Survival funds were obtained to fund the re-design. By 1985, CRS Title II activities were fully integrated into broader mission objectives. One example of the linkage has been the development under the Title II re-design of an innovative growth monitoring instrument of potentially major significance for primary health care services in Indonesia and elsewhere.

#### 2. PHASE TWO EXAMPLE

Primary health care systems in rural Indonesia have shown remarkable improvement in recent years, but still face major challenges in implementation. One source of difficulties is unpaid village health cadres who serve as the interface between the health bureaucracy and local communities. Health programs have come to depend heavily and uncritically on cadres for program success. No systematic examination had been undertaken to review the Indonesian experience with health cadres, to determine what cadres can reasonably be expected to do and under what circumstances. Two Special Studies were, therefore,

carried out in close cooperation with UNICEF, the PPS/Evaluation Section taking the lead for USAID. The first was a review of current literature and interviews with health program managers, the study found several patterns which appeared to hold regardless of differences among programs. For example, it was noted that educational activities were rarely taking place, although this has been one of the major rationales for drawing program staff from local communities. The second study focussed intensively on cadres in villages, as opposed to program contexts. The findings from this study showed that a few women in each village, closely tied to the village head or to local government employees, were doing nearly all the health program work in their villages, with predictable negative effects on motivation. Results of these studies are being widely disseminated and have sparked interest in a health cadre seminar by the joint Family Planning/Health Task Force. The second study is also serving within the mission as a model for other special studies using a similar methodology.

### 3. THE REDBOOK PUBLICATION SERIES

#### 3.1 General Description

One challenge which has faced the USAID/Jakarta mission has been the dissemination of written materials from evaluations and special studies. Usually only a few copies of reports are made and these often remain in "draft". Distribution is primarily through personal contacts. As long as the number of readers for any given piece remains small and easily identified, these methods of dissemination are adequate. In recent years, however, the problem has become more acute. As the mission has made progress in introducing the strategic use of data approach, it has correspondingly invested more of its resources in information-related activities. The potential audience for some studies is large and, except for a core group of readers, cannot be easily identified. This is especially the case when the GOI is to be the major consumer of a mission generated study. Dissemination within the GOI also adds the necessity for more careful editing. To address these growing information dissemination needs, the Project and Program Support Office began in 1985 to print selected evaluations and special studies which are in high local demand. Quantities range from 100 to 200 copies. As interest in the series has grown, more effort has been invested in better editing and in preparing Indonesian Executive Summaries. Mailing lists have been computerized and Mission offices can now easily select persons who they want to receive each new publication.

#### 3.2 An Example

The inner islands of Indonesia have some of the highest

rural population densities in the world. The development of a highly effective family planning program is, therefore, often cited as one of A.I.D.'s major successes. In 1985, the Mission conducted an evaluation of the national program. As in the past, the primary indices for measuring program success were contraceptive prevalence and reduced birth rates, but there was also interest in assessing the impact of the family planning program on Indonesian public expenditures. Part of the evaluation addressed this issue. The results were impressive: due to reductions in population growth rates, the net savings from primary health care and education amounted to nearly \$300 million. It was estimated that by the year 2000, total savings would rise to over \$2 billion. These figures along with calculations of an internal rate of return of close to forty percent and a benefit-cost ratio of 12.5 to 1 were of timely importance for the Indonesian Family Planning Board (BKKBN). With the GOI radically cutting annual budgets (fifty percent over the past two years), the Family Planning Board, like all GOI agencies, was under extreme pressure to reduce its program expenditures. With hard evidence from the USAID study in hand showing substantial potential for reducing future GOI budgetary requirements, the Board entered discussions of budget allocation with senior government decision makers. The GOI subsequently maintained the family planning program budget at existing levels for FY 86 with only slight reductions for FY 87.